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ABSTRACT

The widespread feeling that college officials neglect and ignore student needs in the college curriculum, as well as a concern for the alternatives available to students in the area of general education precipitated the development of this program. The program's directions and goals are systematically elaborated in this report. The basic direction sees the student as the unit of instruction. The academic aspect is based on the "principle" of departing drastically from Mankato's present academic program. Goals include: (1) achieving traditional educational aims through non-traditional means, (2) beginning with the student and not the curriculum, and (3) using interdisciplinary, more involving, and more comprehensive techniques. The operationalizing of these techniques is spelled out. Other aspects are discussed: (1) student and faculty selection, (2) living arrangements and facilities, and (3) governing processes. Administrative, faculty, and student reactions are presented. On the whole, they indicate much support for this experimental effort. Conclusions and suggestions, based on observations and experiences of the program's first year, conclude the report. (TL)

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AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM IN GENERAL EDUCATION AFTER ONE YEAR*

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"It is a paradox in higher education that college officials neglect and ignore what we know about students: their needs, and their later careers. This paradox is reflected most glaringly in the college curriculum."[1] This statement sums up the feelings of many professional people, both administrators and faculty, involved in higher education today. This concern for relevance has prompted several institutions to develop major alternatives in curriculum and sweeping changes in faculty-student interaction.[2,3,4,5,6,7,8] The success of these new programs is,

[1]Lewis B. Mayhew, Contemporary College Students and the Curriculum, SREB Research Monograph Number 14 (Atlanta: 1969).

[2]Jerry G. Gaff and Associates, The Cluster College (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1970).

[3]W. Hugh Stickler (ed.), Experimental Colleges (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1964).

[4]Lewis B. Mayhew, Colleges Today and Tomorrow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1969).

[5]Mayhew, op.cit., p. V.

[6]Michael Brick and Earl J. McGrath, Innovations in Liberal Arts Colleges (Teachers College, Columbia University: Teachers College Press, 1969).

[7]Joseph Tussman, Experiment at Berkeley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[8]Daniel Bell, The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experiment in its National Setting [Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company (Anchor Books), 1968].

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as of now, in large part unknown, but they have demonstrated that contemporary general education with its lectures and labs is not the only way of obtaining knowledge. The developing, so-called "experimental colleges" have demonstrated that there are acceptable alternatives to learning both "required" material and general information of interest to a particular student. Bell suggests that "what one sees today is the falling apart of general education and its replacement by a cafeteria system . . . In the place of general education we have a 'distribution requirement'.[9] A concern for the alternatives available to students in the area of general education provided the impetus for the development during the summer of 1969 of an Experimental Studies Program in General Education at Mankato State College.

During the summer of 1969, following an experimental "live-in" (an interdisciplinary, problem-centered living-learning experiment involving fourteen upperclass students)[10] an interest was developed in the area of experimental programs at the freshmen level. The Experimental Studies Committee was appointed and charged by the President with the responsibility of designing an Experimental Studies Program in General Education for Fall Quarter, 1969.

This committee worked ardously during the summer to create an Experimental Studies Program in General Education. Dr. Vito Perone and Dr. Warren Strandberg, from the New School of the University of North Dakota, acted as consultants to the committee. At the conclusion of the summer the committee along with members of the college administration and several members of the faculty met in a retreat setting in Hudson, Wisconsin, to finalize plans for the program to be implemented Fall Quarter. This workshop was held following authorization from the Mankato State College Curriculum Committee and the Administration.

[9]Daniel Bell, ibid., As reviewed in American Sociological Review, Volume XXXV, Number 1 (February 1970), p. 170.

[10]Robert V. Vander Wilt, "Student-Faculty Cooperation in an Interdisciplinary Experiment", NASPA Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2,(October, 1970).

Directions and Goals

The general direction of the academic aspect of the Experimental Studies Program elaborated in the cover letter sent to prospective freshman candidates during the Summer of 1969 was stated as follows:

"The Experimental Program, to be truly experimental, will make a sharp break from the traditional practices and structures.

Where the present program is discipline oriented, the experimental program will be interdisciplinary, with the student as the basic learning unit.

Where the present program is focused on presentation of facts, the experimental program will focus on the understanding of principles, upon the mastery of processes which will enable the student to adapt to new information.

Where the present program begins with a curriculum, the experimental programs will begin with students.

Where the present program sees liberal education as the mastery of certain prescribed books and facts, the experimental program sees liberal education as the humanizing of the individual through experiences which are important to him.

Where the present program separates teachers and students, the experimental program will bring them together so that they will know each other as individuals.

Where the present program is largely based on the lecture method, the experimental program will give the teacher opportunity to play many roles — even be a student himself.

Where the present program does not encourage much interaction among members of various disciplines, the experimental program will force members of various disciplines to work closely together on a day-to-day basis.

Where the present program is dependent almost wholly on faculty determination of curriculum and method, the experimental program would use considerable student participation in planning . . .

Thus, the individual student becomes the unit of instruction.

The curricular content of the year-long experiment will encompass those areas in which the entering freshman is typically engaged, however an attempt will be made to identify those integrative mechanisms which will draw both disciplines and faculty together in a coordinated manner.

This program will be structured wherever possible so that the faculty may be engaged jointly with students in the common endeavor.

The learning will be accomplished generally through teacher-student interaction and discussions, through peer group relationships, and through independent study."[11]

The specific goals of the Experimental Studies Program in General Education were defined as follows:

1. "To achieve the traditional aims of general education through non-traditional methods and patterns.
2. To begin with the student rather than with a curriculum in planning learning experience.
3. To use interdisciplinary techniques in a thematic pattern for learning rather than to use the traditional courses in various disciplines.
4. To motivate learning without the superficial device of grades at the same time to prepare students for entry into the regular curriculum.
5. To create an atmosphere in which students and teachers alike can know each other as individuals participating in common learning experiences.
6. To develop learning experiences out of the student's present situation and interest, rather than to impose a pre-determined curriculum upon him.
7. To encourage student participation in every phase of the learning process.
8. To provide enough structure to give an initial push to the learning process, with less and less structure applied as the self-generating process begins.

[11]Robert C. Wright, "The Rationale for the Experimental Program in General Education", Unpublished Manuscript (Mankato State College, Mankato, Minnesota, 1969).

9. To give students an opportunity to learn by building a community through shared living experiences.
10. To create a learning unit within the greater college which has the advantage of intimacy along with the advantages of a multi-faceted institution.
11. To develop in students an awareness of themselves and their environment which will give purpose to their learning and encourage a life-long commitment to self-directed education.
12. To develop appropriate evaluative techniques for measuring both the success of the experiment and the progress of individual students.
13. To provide a full spectrum of learning experiences, verbal and non-verbal for both active and passive participation."[12]

Academic Nature of the Program

Decisions regarding the development of the academic nature of the program were made by a Student-Faculty Steering Committee constituted during the first week of Fall Quarter. This committee was made up of four faculty and four students and was charged with further developing the academic program for Fall Quarter.

The theme for the Fall Quarter's work was "Man's Relationship to His Society." Concurrent with the theme a core of readings was assigned. These included: Experiment at Berkeley, Search for Awareness, Billy Budd, The Source, Walden, The Lonely Crowd, and Death of a Salesman. From this core of readings a series of general seminars were developed. Each of these involved approximately twenty students and met twice weekly for a two-hour period. From the general seminars, specific seminars were developed in which five to ten students along with one or more faculty would delve more deeply into related areas of interest such as law, environment, religion, population and others. Examples of the topics investigated included: "Mankato--A Study of Community," "A Study of Man and His Laws," "Man and

[12]Robert C. Wright, "Goals of the Experimental Program in General Education", Unpublished Manuscript (Mankato State College, Mankato, Minnesota, 1969).

His Environment" (ecologically and biologically), "Man and His Religion" (Judaism, Christianity, etc.), and "The Population Explosion." Students were encouraged to participate in independent study. Many met with faculty individually to aid them in formulating procedures to gain an understanding of the area or topic selected. Seminars, discussions, lectures, movies and demonstrations were scheduled flexibly and student attendance was not mandatory.

During the second quarter, the students chose to study certain problem areas of society. Of the fifteen problem areas nominated, three areas including Mental Health, Communications and Racism were chosen. Each topic was allotted a three-week time period in which there were speakers, movies and student presentations. All students visited a nearby mental hospital and six members of the program lived and worked with the patients for an entire week. Some students continued to provide volunteer services to the hospital. The Communications section included in-depth studies of verbal and non-verbal communications, multimedia discussions, and even a day spent without speaking or writing a word. The balance of the quarter was spent studying minority group problems. The study was conducted historically as well as currently. Along with the three major topics covered during this quarter, small group and individual topics continued from the first quarter and also continued throughout the entire year. Examples included a T.V. seminar, art and modern dance seminars, studios in ecology, philosophy, modern novels, theatre and speech.

The Spring Quarter was largely devoted to independent study and with an overall theme centered on community. The Experimental Studies Program in General Education sponsored a "Day of Ideas" at which all students, faculty and townspeople were invited to discuss problems of contemporary society. The quarter's work was largely devoted to independent study inasmuch as students had moved from dependence to independence and felt they were capable of carrying on individual study with the guidance from faculty.

The evaluation of the academic experience was one of the most difficult tasks of the year. The main responsibility for evaluation was assumed by the student's faculty advisor. The student and advisor hopefully reached an agreement regarding the student's work. In instances where agreement could not be reached, appeal could be made to a special committee made up of two students and one faculty member. Members of the committee would be different in each appeal hearing. A group of students and faculty formed a pool from which specific membership would be drawn in various instances.

Credits and Grades

The Experimental Studies Program in General Education, as originally established, was to be an alternative to the existing general education program. However, administrative and faculty approval of the program for the first year was based on the premise that this alternative would exist within the present general education requirements and that credits for specific subject matter areas would be granted to the student at the end of each quarter. For example, each student would register for sixteen hours of "Experimental Studies" at the beginning of the quarter. At the end of the quarter, full credit or partial credit would be granted depending upon the evaluation of the student's work by the student and his faculty advisor, and these credits would be a substitute for introductory courses in Sociology, Psychology, History, Geography, etc. The assumption was that even though a student did not have formal classroom experience in the subject matter area, his reading, seminar, projects and experiences in the experimental program were such that they would provide an adequate substitute. This was not true in the "hard science" areas since it was assumed that in highly technical areas basic fundamentals or "beginnings" could not be learned under the existing format of the experimental program. Adequate preparation in these areas was to be worked out in a future realignment of the program. The credit goal of the program was for the student to acquire 48 quarter hours of credit or one-half of his general education requirement at the completion

of one academic year. In the acceptable subject matter areas, he could immediately sign up for the second course in the area when he returned to the traditional program at the beginning of his sophomore year.

In the case of a student dropping out of the program before the completion of a full three quarters in the experimental program, a faculty evaluation team would then determine which subject matter credits would be granted. The student could still fulfill some of the general education requirements and not be penalized for his participation in the experimental program.

Grade assignment differed considerably from the traditional program in that only "pass-no-credit" grades were issued. The rationale of the program initially was to eliminate unnecessary competition for the traditional letter grades hoping to emphasize learning achievement rather than grade achievement.

Student Selection

During the summer of 1969, a random sample was selected from the list of those admitted to Mankato State College as new freshmen students for Fall Quarter 1969. These students were sent letters inviting their participation in the program. When the Fall Quarter commenced, 82 students had accepted the invitation and had enrolled in the program.

Faculty Selection

The experimental program was allocated the equivalent of five and one-half full-time faculty positions. Only two persons served on a full-time basis. These two full-time positions were persons previously employed in the Student Services division of the College. The Director served one-half time while also serving as the chairman of the Department of English. Other faculty assumed various commitments of time. A total of fifteen faculty members participated at one time or another during the academic year. Departments giving up staff for the project received equivalent positions to replace those borrowed. In addition to these

faculty members, a graduate assistant was assigned to the program as well as two resident assistants (residence hall staff). Additional faculty were utilized on a volunteer basis as reference persons.

The budget allotted to the Experimental Studies Program was allocated according to the same formula that other academic programs are funded in the School of Arts and Sciences. Also a faculty-student ratio was maintained that was consistent with the faculty-student ratio elsewhere in the School of Arts and Sciences.

Living Arrangements and Facilities

Students participating in the program lived together in one wing of a residence center. Female students lived on the upper two floors while male students lived on the lower two floors. Faculty offices were located next to lounges in the student living area. Meetings, seminars, and other group functions were held in the lounge areas in the residence hall, in the library and other classroom buildings.

Governing Processes

According to the Director "An important part of the experiment was to see just how much initiative students could take in designing their own curriculum, supervising their own behavior, and building a community."[13]

In the area of social conduct the students felt no restrictions should be imposed and developed a resolution to that effect. It was accepted by the Administration of the College. Any regulations that evolved were developed by the participating students and faculty as a community. Regulations did develop in this manner as students learned that in a group-living situation certain guidelines were necessary.

[13]Robert C. Wright, "Report on the Experimental Program in General Education," Unpublished Manuscript (Mankato State College, Mankato, Minnesota, 1970).

Subjective Evaluation

Administrative Reaction

From the outset of the experimental program, there was a very favorable administrative commitment to its development and success. In January of the first year's operation, a decision was made to continue and expand the program in the following year. Beginning Fall Quarter, 1970, the program will include not only freshmen, but a limited number of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. A full-time director has been hired as well as full-time faculty and staff.

Faculty Reaction

Teaching in a new program is not an easy venture. Oftentimes the frustrations of the new and unknown are prevalent. The majority of the faculty who participated in the program indicated that this assignment was, by far, more difficult than teaching the normal load of classes in the traditional program. Different types of preparation, unusual class settings and charged interaction patterns with students and other staff were several of the many alterations needed to be resolved. Many faculty experienced difficulty in functioning in the interdisciplinary approach when communication difficulties were being experienced. This faculty experienced many of the problems similar to those cited by Tussman[14] and Vander Wilt[15] in comparable unstructured learning situations. In a positive sense, the majority of the faculty enjoyed the intellectual stimulation, the freedom of thought and discussion and the flexibility allowed in this type of experience. The director of the program indicated "a positive response was received from most faculty who participated."[16]

Student Reaction

When observing the number of students who enrolled in the program initially during the Fall Quarter, 1969, and comparing that number to those dropping out or those not completing the entire first year, that data tends to indicate a favorable

[14]Tussman, op.cit., part I, section I, p.5.
[15]Vander Wilt, op.cit.
[16]Wright, op.cit.

response or at least a demonstrated willingness to give the experimental program a good try. Of the 84 students enrolled Fall Quarter, 65 completed the entire year. A petition signed by over 60 students and faculty was presented to the Administration during Spring Quarter requesting an extension of the experiment into the sophomore year.

The majority of the students reacted to the new, unstructured situation with what might be considered a typical, somewhat confused state. The combination of the new environment of a college situation plus the experimental nature of the program were compounding factors. The faculty and staff, due to the experimental nature of the academic and social environment, oftentimes added to the early confusion of the student. The early lack of some structure and direction was a general complaint of the majority of students. The abrupt transfer from twelve years of a traditional lock-step, lecture-lab educational experience to one without these characteristics must be gradual to avoid confusion and anomie in the early weeks of the first quarter. After this early confusion when the Steering Committee became operative and topics for discussion were selected, the roles of both students and faculty became more defined and predictable. The major favorable reaction of the students came in the form of the enthusiasm elicited to make the experimental program a success. A feeling of community in the learning experience developed very quickly - a very positive factor related directly to the living and learning environment. Coupled with this was the freedom of the learning involvement and the opportunity to explore areas of interest in depth without being "locked into" a rigid class and grade program. The favorability of this fact far outweighed any negative factors of the entire program once it was under way.

A positive evaluation of the experiences of the first year was submitted by Dr. Vito Perone, Dean of the New School, University of North Dakota, who acted as a consultant to the program.

Also the Experimental Studies Advisory Committee submitted a recommendation for continuation and expansion of the program.

These evaluations, although subjective, seem to indicate a desire on the part of students, faculty, and administrators for the experimental effort to be continued.

Conclusions and Suggestions

From the observations and experiences of the initial year of operation of an experimental college, the following suggestions for improved operation will be offered:

1. A full-time director along with a full-time faculty and staff appears to be a necessity. In the initial year, neither was the case in this program with the exception of the two assistant directors. When the faculty and the director feel the press of other assignments, a total commitment to experimental education is not possible.

2. Faculty recruitment should be well planned and organized to fit the needs of the total program not selecting only those who are willing to participate in a new venture. As Tussman suggests, "We should look to the tenure ranks in terms of both suitability and availability. Readiness for ventures into first-program teaching should be seen as marking the end of academic adolescence."[17]

3. After the faculty and director have been chosen, well-thought-out academic plans should be formulated, especially to eliminate early communication problems and confusion on the part of both faculty and students.

4. Student selection for the program should be both objective and subjective. An analysis of test scores and grades achieved to date should be performed. Personal interviews with potential student participation should be conducted by a panel of faculty and students to determine academic commitment to this type of program and other factors. Perhaps recommendations from previous teachers would also help in making the selection. As Mayhew suggests, "Now it should be pointed out that not all students can tolerate the freedom to use educational resources at

[17]Tussman, op.cit., p.21.

their own volition, and almost all demand greater professional activity."[18] It appears to be a grave injustice to place a student in this type of program when he is not suited for it.

5. Student-faculty interaction should begin early in the program or before it actually starts so that joint decisions regarding roles to be played, academic pursuits and overall joint planning can be facilitated with ease and expediency. This kind of effort will avoid a waste of time and a duplication of effort. This would also partially eliminate early confusion and also potentially serve to stifle the development of alienation on the part of both faculty and students.

6. The director and the faculty should be "officed" in or near the facility housing the experimental program. Ease of accessibility to facility could surely enhance the program. However if meeting areas, living quarters and faculty offices are in close proximity the program is likely to become intense with few opportunities for faculty and students periodically "to get away from it all."

7. Academically, the experimental program should be a separate part of the general education requirements. Credit in specific academic areas should not be assigned to work completed in the experimental program. A major in experimental studies is under consideration at this time and would serve to eliminate this "plugging-in" status of these new programs. Grade and evaluation autonomy are necessary as well.

8. Common living facilities that also provide for academic use space are very desirable. The feeling of a "community of learners" can be developed by all the participants and can provide for a truly unique learning experience. Easy access to other participants at any time of the day can facilitate the development of joint projects and mutually beneficial discussion.

9. Faculty should be prepared and trained to participate in an interdisciplinary situation. For many, this is a very difficult task. Adequate preparation in this area can forestall a return to a multi-disciplinary approach if the interdisciplinary one becomes too difficult to adjust to.

[18]Mayhew, op.cit., p.31.

10. A better means of evaluating both faculty and students should be developed so as to better determine who should remain as participants in the program. Traditional tests do not apply and periodic interviews can be potentially traumatic as well as indicating little if anything concerning continued participation.

Some of these suggestions represent ideals, some perhaps more attainable than others. No system of education is perfect nor, perhaps, will one ever be in the distant future. Most everyone involved in higher education recognizes the need for change and the development of curricular alternatives. This program along with the suggestions above is one way in which we can pursue the goals of making general education more relevant in a world of mass communication and rapid technological and social change.

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